

## **My experience working with custom cutters**

**By David Badger**

It was in the spring, 1960—I was into the college years and needed more money. I worked two summers in a factory that made paintbrushes. That experience convinced me of one thing—I did not want to spend my life that way! Enter the imagination and discussion of friends. Somewhere in these discussions I became captivated by the idea of working on a custom combine crew. That would be an adventure! My first search letter fizzled. I had to go back to the paint-brush factory. Several months passed. Now I was at Ohio State University. I came across a friend that had similar ideas and had written to Texas A&M asking for names of custom cutters. A letter came back with four names. No one had the gumption to write to these fellows. I got the letter and wrote to all four names. Two answered back. The year was 1961.

One letter came back saying he had new Massey Ferguson Super 92 combines and wanted me to come drive one of them for the summer. Panic! How did I know everything was legitimate? The Better Business Bureau would not help me but did tell me to go to the local bank and tell them what I wanted. I waited to talk to a teller. He invited me back to a private office and laid out a big book, maybe 8" thick. His eyes and finger raced along the pages until he came to Wellington, Texas. He picked the largest bank and gave me a phone number with instructions to call this bank. He also said not to write a letter. When I called, I asked the man at the other end things about this cutter's age and family. How long he had been in business? When I asked about his credit rating, the man replied, "The name of (the cutter) was as good as gold". (I learned later he held the second largest stock holding in this bank.)

Six weeks later I was on a Greyhound bus traveling 1200 miles to Shamrock, Texas. It was about the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, The cutter's family met me at the bus station and took me to their home in Wellington. The next morning they took me outside to see four gleaming new Super 92s. A brother and son-in-law had another one left over from last year. What was the task for the day? The cutter's son said we were going to wax the combines. (The new kid on the block is the brunt of ridiculous jokes. Was that happening?) Wrong! They waxed the combines! Believe me, waxing a car is child's play after waxing combines. I questioned the reasoning behind the wax job. These machines would run the wheat harvest and be hauled back home by Labor Day. They would already be sold to go into sorghum harvest. The wax job made them much easier to clean up before going back to the dealer.

A few days lapsed until we got word the wheat was ready at Quanah, Texas, our first stop. We had assembled our train of vehicles: an old city bus equipped with bunk beds, two pickup trucks, five Chevy trucks with 14 foot Midwest grain beds, and five trailers specially made to tip and allow the combines to roll on and off. These trailers had wheel wells positioned to cradle the big drive wheels with the two log chains were held tightly in place by chain binders. One pickup led the caravan and the other pickup pulled a trailer with a 300-gallon gasoline tank at the end of the procession.

This was before the invention of quick detachable tables (or headers). So the combines were hauled with headers still attached facing forward. At the time a "Harvest Emergency" was in effect during the wheat harvest months that allowed combines to be hauled up to a width of 15 feet. This crew ran 14 foot headers which measured 14'6" overall width. Pulling a combine facing forward with a header in place creates tremendous drag depending on wind speed and direction.

It was quite a thrill to be part of this moving train of vehicles. Words cannot express the thrill. Many of the crew were high-school "kids". Most had not been on a harvest crew before. They were pretty "green around the ears"—just old enough to have a driver's license. There were specific instruction: one was "When towing a combine you do not try to pass someone! On a previous year a truck driver tried that—locking one header against another one! They tore up two combines in one accident. The truck drivers must always be vigilant for bridge girders, electric poles, and other trucks. We made it to Quanah with no damaging events.

We did not have a great acreage at this location. "My" Super 92 handled beautifully. The engine was responsive and the steering was smooth. By standing up I could see all the way around the combine. The controls were all easy to reach. We paid close attention to all belts and

chains. The tension had to be “just right”. Every morning we checked the engine oil, emptied air pre-cleaners and greased critical bearings. The double stand roller chain on the right side from the beater shaft to the threshing cylinder shaft was the most critical of any moving part on the machine. It had to have just the right amount of slack—not too tight—not too loose. Either way, this chain would wear into the sprocket teeth! We might adjust this chain two or even three times a day. We learned to “feel” the bearings for too much heat and were always on the lookout for something that was not running normally.

The wheat had a hot smell when it was ready. We might reach down and grasp a handful of standing wheat. It is was dry (12-14% moisture) a quick shake would give a dry rattling sound. We might rub a few heads between our hands and blow the chaff away. We would test the wheat kernels by chewing them. We got pretty good at estimating the moisture content. The read test was when we cut some for a sample. The owner would run the sample to the local grain elevator. If the sample was acceptable he would be honking the horn when he came into view. We were to have the engines running and the reels turning into the wheat by the time the pickup rolled up beside us. These guys had one goal: to see how much wheat they could cut in a day.

Our lunch was usually what a truck driver bought on his way back from town after he dumped his load of wheat. Lunch was set on the tail gate of one of the pickups. It would be a loaf of white bread, some sliced baloney, a jar of mustard and a quart of milk for each person. The combine drivers ate while a truck driver made one round. Yesterday’s lunch was the same as would be tomorrow’s. These guys had nicknames for each food item but I wouldn’t describe them here. It was no place for picky eaters or the faint-of-heart.

One day, a land owner picked two of us combine drivers to follow a fellow in a white Ford pickup to cut his patch of wheat. Bud and I must have followed the white pickup for 20 miles. When the man stopped and pointed for us to pull into his “patch”, it turned out to be a full quarter section—160 acres. His idea of a “patch” was a lot different from my idea of a patch.

After about 10 days we had the Quanah area cut. This stop was kind of a dry run for the “real thing”. The crew moved the caravan back to Wellington for a couple days to regroup and gather more supplies. Then the crew headed north for Dumas, Texas. We pulled in to a cow pasture maybe a half mile off the road to a little concrete block building next to a windmill and a watering trough. There were two cabins. The cutter and his family slept in them while the crew slept in the old city bus. The concrete block building is where we took cold showers. The first evening we did not have “camp” fully set up. We cut until dark then headed to town to eat. We could see the town over across the wheat field. Would you believe we drove 35 miles to get to Dumas? This flat country distorted my senses.

I had an experience here that left me a bit shaken. I was combining across the field when something caught the corner of my eye. I looked to the rear and dumfounded to see the farmer in his new Chrysler with the nose of the car stick under the back of my combine! These guys do not scratch the ground looking for loose kernels that have gone through the combine. Instead they listen to the hard winter wheat kernels hitting the sheet metal of the car hood. If he hears grain hitting then we stop and readjust the combine. I was shaken. If I had stopped quickly, the straw spreader paddles would have wiped out his windshield. I always kept an eye to the rear after that!

**In part II, Dave finishes the story of his experiences at a custom cutter.**

A few days here and we moved the combines north to the second largest wheat grower in the U.S. As I remember, he had 7000 acres and his wheat was ready to cut. When he put the word out the custom cutters would descend on his place like flies. One day it was reported there were 32 combines working on his land. Everything is flat at Dumas and we could see combines operating in all directions. I stopped and stood up on the grain tank and counted 28 combines.

That year the combine makes were pretty well divided at one-third Massey, one-third Gleaner and one-third John Deere. The Gleaners were a smaller machine probably models “A” and “C”. They were great in wheat that did not yield above 30 bushels to the acre. The Massey had a low racy look, ideal for hauling on trailers. They had much more separator capacity than the Gleaners. The John Deere 95’s looked like lumbering giants beside the Gleaners and the Massey’s.

The JD 95's typically ran 18-foot headers. The JD 105 was introduced that year but we never saw any on the custom circuit. I was quite rare to see any other make combines. None of the combines had cabs but ours had buggy-type umbrellas. Many machines had no protection from the sun at all.

They said the wheat was yielding 29 bushels-to-the acre. (A far cry from the 50 that we grew in Ohio!) These guys did not use any fertilizer. Soil preparation was one pass of D-6 Caterpillar pulling squadrons of 5-foot V-wing sweeps that only cut about two inches under the surface of the soil to kill weeds. Then other D-6's came through each pulling a squadron of seven-grain drills.

In this wheat yield, the Gleaners could just drive off and leave the Massey's behind. There was something about the heads on the Gleaners—they cut faster. The Massey was limited by the wobble-stick sickle-bar drive. However, if a storm put the crop down, the Massey's had the capacity to handle the crop (with all of the extra straw) and the Cleaners were hurting.

The trucks went only about five miles and across farm scales right to a long auger dumping into a Quonset storage building. One of our crew made a wise crack that this building would not hold much wheat. When we got close, it had a much bigger look. I believe it was 60 feet wide and 180 feet long. I remember that with all the combines working two weeks, the wheat from all of them still did not fill that building.

On a Friday morning, our crew pulled into a square mile of wheat. It was so far around that the two lead combines split the square mile into quarters. That allowed the combines to make one round while the truck looped past to unload on the go. The truck drivers were masters at positioning themselves so the dirt and chaff always blew away from them. The combine drivers sat in the dirt all the time! Little black dirt balls would form at the corners of our eyes. We wore sunglasses mainly to shield our eyes from the dust. The wheat dust was tolerable. We did one field of barley and the dust itches so badly we wanted to climb of our clothes.

Cutting off quarter sections was very efficient. The combines just kept going around and around. The truck drivers normally had time to spare, waiting on the combines but now we ran them ragged. We would have the combines up in pairs with unloading augers pointing together. A truck would drive under the augers and in about one and one-half minutes our tanks would be empty. The truck would move to the next combine. In a matter of a few minutes the truck was full and heading toward the scales. That was our best day – we sent 42 loads of wheat to storage.

The next day was Saturday. We continued cutting out the square mile of wheat. About mid-afternoon, a huge thunderstorm rolled in from the west, going past us to our north. The sky looked black and vicious. It hung north of us for what seemed like to hours and the temperature dropped 30° in an hour. We were dressed in T-shirts and shorts – not prepared for this -- we thought that we would freeze! Then the storm turned and headed straight for us. We were so desperately trying to finish the square mile and we were down to about five acres. They kept us on the combines until we had to leave. It was coming across the field! We shut down and bolted for the only pick-up truck left. Somehow seven of us got into the cab of that pick-up. Then the storm hit. Rain came in blinding sheets, hail bounced off the pick-up. Darkness seemed to come in seconds. Lightning split the sky like giant strobe lights and the thunder was deafening. There was no place to hide – no trees, no buildings – just flat open space. It looked like God was spilling his wrath right down on us! With this huge amount of rainfall the dirt roads turn as slippery as grease. We passed someone else's grain truck that had slid into a drainage ditch spilling a load of wheat, all very sobering! The pick-up was slipping and sliding, sometimes crossways on the road. We had five miles to get to a hard road. It seemed like an eternity to reach the hard road.

On this farm we actually ran the combines for 20 hours one day. We started at 8:30 a.m. and ran to 4:30 the next morning. Truck drivers would jump on the combines usually for one round to spell the combine drivers long enough to gulp down food brought to the field by the owner's wife and daughters. It was one of these long nights; about 3:00 a.m. that a truck pulled along side Dan to have him unload his grain tank. Dan had folded his arms across the steering wheel and was fast asleep. The pulled him out and someone else took over.

I was doing ok and had enough sense to get some sleep whenever I could. This was the longest week we had put in. I tallied 107 hours in seven consecutive days.

There is always wind across the plains. That kept the moisture low at night so we could keep

the combines going. Dub, our mechanic, would joke that we cut more wheat with the headlights on than with them off. It was one of these long nights, around mid-night, that Dub ran a big skunk through his combine. The combine threshed that skunk all night – everything went through but the scent. We all avoided Dub for several days.

The day after the storm was Sunday and Ray had us up and out to the field by 8:30 a.m. We spent the entire day doing maintenance such as changing engine oil, adjusting all the chains and belts. We checked tire pressures, thoroughly lubing everything. All of the trucks got similar attention. Nothing was left to chance.

We had run the combines over a month and the driver and his machine had a way of molding into one. Somehow the mind learned to blank out the machine's noise and vibration. It all came to light when some problem occurred with our machine. We would flag down Dub, our mechanic and we would switch machines so he could find and correct the problem. Now on a different combine nothing seemed right. It had different noises and vibrations. The steering felt different. The header lift seemed a lot slower. We were always glad to get back on our own machine.

After the storm we had wet ground to contend with. Our Massey's were equipped with the largest tires available from the factory. These machines were perfectly balanced fore and aft over the drive wheels. If a driver was paying attention, he could always back out of any soft place he pulled into. Backing tended to lift the rear wheels out and throw even more weight onto the drive wheels. The field had a natural depression close to our staging area. The storm had filled the depression creating a three-acre lake with a triangle of wheat left standing at one side. Bud decided to drive out along the water and cut this standing wheat. His combine quickly went down. We backed one of our combines out close to Bud hoping that the standing grain would give enough traction to get out. It didn't work. There were no tractors close so we flagged down a JD 95 coming by. The driver backed the 95 out toward Bud and attached two long chains to reach Bud's combine. The 95 leaned into the chain and easily pulled Bud out of his 20-foot long ugly ruts. Then the John Deere driver lowered the header and cut a path of grain while dragging Bud and his combine out of the soft area. It was a sight I had to see to believe!

As we prepared to move north across the state line, there was another new experience for us drivers. There are state laws prohibiting the transport of noxious weed seed across state lines. We had to take all of the access panels off to clean out any plant remains. The shaker pan was packed with dirt and chaff so we would dig and scrape away the dirt then start up the machine, letting it run until only clean air came out of the rear. As the caravan headed north we were flagged over to an inspection post. State inspectors asked us to start the engines and run the separator a full speed. We had done our job well, the combines were clean and they waved us on.

Our caravan rolled north, up through Lamar Colorado and on to Cheyenne Wells. There were lots combines parked there hoping for a call to cut wheat for someone. It didn't take long to size up the situation; some cutters were struggling for their existence.

We were stuck here because it was the fourth of July. Since it was a holiday we were not suppose to have our over-width machines on the highway and the boss was fuming. The weather was perfect and he had made several calls to farmer he knew along the way. He couldn't wait so we moved out at 3:00 p.m. for Akron, Colorado.

Akron was a spot on the map. There was a grain elevator beside the railroad tracks, a few houses, a bowling alley and a theater that changed shows every three days. I remember seeing a show then wondering what to do for the next two days. The working days were short here because the evening dew would stop us by 7:00 p.m. We cut here for about two weeks.

Rumors were flying around that there were new experimental Massey's running out west of town. I think it was a Sunday afternoon and I went along with the owner's son and son-in-law. We seemed to drive a long way and finally pulled up at a field entrance and we could see two red specks far across the wheat field. The guys stood in silence for a minute or so and suddenly let loose with a barrage of expletives. These machines were way too high. They would not haul well on the trailers. Disgusted, they got back into the truck and headed back to town. We had just seen prototypes of the Massey Ferguson 300 and 410 combines.

There was one important rule, no drinking while on the job. That worked well as long as we were cutting but if we had a rainy day, look out. One Saturday night we had the old bus parked at the edge of town and were within walking distance of the stores and bars in town. The beer here

was 6.4%, which was twice the strength the boys were familiar with in Texas. Bill had a little too much but made it back to the bus and was lying in the dirt by the front door groaning. Lightning was flashing in the sky and I pretended to be asleep. Finally Roy took pity on Bill and lugged his limp body through the dark center aisle of the bus to get him into the top bunk. It must have taken Roy ten minutes because he was very coherent himself. After much straining, Roy got Bill into his bunk at which point he yelled, "I'm goanna barf." The bus came alive and Bill was back outside in the dirt in 15 seconds.

We had our wheat cut in 10 days and it was time to move on. The cutter had word that the crop was poor in South Dakota because of low rainfall. He sent only two combines north. The others headed back to Texas.

Dub and I left early one morning in one truck pulling a trailer with a combine. We had no escort except for a stiff wind out of the north. The combine header acted like a boat anchor holding us back. The truck was a Chevy with a six-cylinder engine and a four-speed transmission and two-speed axle. We spent most of the day in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear and Dub held the accelerator to the floor all day. The trailer would buck and jump and the truck would respond with leaps. We traveled Route 18 and 83 up through Pierre, South Dakota and across the river. The bridge was 3/4 mile long and looked like a tunnel. There was not room for any other vehicles to pass with the combine header sticking way out past the truck on both sides. When Dub arrived at the bridge, I hitched a ride across to block traffic. I sent a wrench across with a family to hand to Dub indicating that the coast was clear for him to come across. While I am holding back traffic, people were cussing me for blocking the road. I had to stand in the middle and not yield an inch. I was certainly glad to see Dub appear and get me out of there. We managed to make it to McLaughlin, South Dakota before dark.

The wheat here was thin. We could see jackrabbits between the rows way out into the field. We cut enough wheat for our farmer customers to have seed for next year

We cut a of field flax, which is a little flat slippery seed. We had to block the cleaning fan openings with cardboard to prevent blowing the flax seed out the back of the combine. When we looked in the grain tank we seemed to have an equal amount of grasshoppers to flax seed. There just wasn't much crop to be harvested. Normally the cutter would take his combines on to Rider, North Dakota. The crop was so poor they were not even going to North Dakota.

So, on the evening of August 7<sup>th</sup>, the owner put me on the train at Mobridge, South Dakota to head back home. So ended my summer with the Massey Super 92, it was a summer to remember!